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ABSTRACT

Although the great heterogeneity of Afro-American culture makes the identification of unique culture traits extremely difficult, two cultural extremes may be discerned; most people fall somewhere between. Mainstream culture is best exemplified in the life style of middle class white America. Many Negroes strive to copy this life style in their behavior as much as their economic situations allow and apparently most blacks verbalize such aspirations regardless of how they live. At the other extreme are the members of the folk culture; their life styles, whether they live in the city or the country, are essentially unchanged from those of the black tenant farmer or sharecropper of 50 years age. While women tend to resemble the mainstream more in their behavior patterns, men tend to preserve the folk culture. The differences between the black and white children's perceptions of school can be explained in part in terms of cultural factors. The trickster mentality and the attitude of contest, as well as language and speech style may have at least as much influence as socioeconomic variables, self concept, and teacher bias. Such traits serve as cultural markers, points of identification by which one can know oneself to be a member of one's own group.
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LITTLE LEROY VIEWS HIS SCHOOL

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Introduction

The material which follows is not descriptive of all Negroes, it is not descriptive of all lower-class Negroes. One of the outstanding aspects of Afro-American culture, and a plague to many anthropologists, is its great heterogeneity, which makes identification of the unique culture traits which differentiate black from mainstream cultures extremely difficult. One of the ways of handling the problem has been to hypothesize two cultural extremes among blacks while noting that most people fall somewhere between. This approach has been taken by among others, Bernard (1966) who labeled the two extremes acculturated and externally adapted, and by Hannerz (1969) who speaks of mainstream and ghetto cultures. I prefer the terms of mainstream and folk cultures.

Mainstream culture is best exemplified in the life style of middle class white America as popularized by the mass media. Many Negroes strive to copy this life style in their behavior as much as their economic situations allow and apparently most blacks verbalize such aspirations regardless of how they live (Liebow 1966, Stewart, personal communication). While many strive so hard that they exaggerate some of the more obvious cultural markers, as is true of all acculturating peoples, others do manage to live in ways virtually undistinguishable from middle class whites.

At the other extreme are the members of the folk culture; their life styles, whether they live in the city or the country, are essentially unchanged from those of the black tenant farmer or sharecropper of 50 years ago. Such people are as rare as those fully acculturated to the mainstream. Rather, most blacks fall somewhere between the two and their behavior varies according to the situations in which they find themselves as much as according to their general levels of acculturation.

It has often been noted that women tend to resemble the mainstream more in their behavior patterns than do men. Women have greater access to the mainstream, both as observers (such as domestic workers in white middle class homes) and as participants; for example, a larger percentage of women find white collar work than do men. Differences in levels of acculturation appear early in the school years, with girls tending to adjust more successfully to the demands of the school, itself an acculturating agency. Men tend to preserve the folk culture more than do women.

Most studies of the folk culture have, per force, been made through the male perspective. Much of the material which follows, especially that which derives from the literature, is also more largely descriptive of males than of both males and females.

Little Leroy Views His School

Little Leroy was seven years old. He was a cute little fellow, lively, with a big grin.

"Do you like school?"

"Yaas."

"What do you like about school?"

"Faitin'."

Little Leroy, who has grown up in the black ghetto of Washington, D. C. and his middle class teachers, black or white, see the school from very different perspectives. Some of the differences, of course, are due to age, but more than age is responsible.

Little Leroy has grown up in a world full of people, a world in which he has learned from the first to find his satisfactions and pleasures from others rather than from objects or from solitary contemplation. Interaction with others has been continuous and intense almost from the moment he was born. V. H. Young (1970), in a study of baby care among blacks in a Southern industrial town, found that personal contacts were so frequent that even infants' sleep was interrupted by adults and older children wanting to play with them. Practices in Washington, D. C. do not appear to differ significantly. Working mothers are seldom reported to leave their babies alone surrounded by toys; rather the pattern is to leave young children in the care of an older woman, preferably a member of the household, who often finds herself caring for more than one child at a time.

According to Young (1970) affection is lavished on infants. They are played with and handled almost constantly; they are encouraged to respond, their every move being commented on and interpreted. Once well into the toddler stage, and especially when supplanted by new-borns, young children are left more and more in the care of older siblings and other related children. The intensity of the interactions does not diminish, nor does the frequency, although the nature of the interactions changes. Young (1970) has described how the children she observed were always seen in little groups, not alone, that they spent their time primarily in gossip and in large muscle and imitative play, and that the only objects with which they were seen to play were junebugs which they lassoed and then raced. As she points out, junebugs are hardly inanimate objects!

In the alleys and on the playgrounds of Washington's inner city I have never seen children playing alone for more than a few seconds. A child may go off to sulk alone, but solitary play is virtually unknown.

Rather, children who have been deserted by their companions almost always run off to join them or another group of children within a minute or two. Indeed, it is rare to find a child alone at any time, even when running an errand; few households have only one child.

Nor do the children use many toys in their play. They may carry about a car or some other object, but their play almost always focuses on one another rather than on the objects they carry or the large muscle skills (such as sliding) they may be practicing.

Young (1970) also found that the rhythms of eating and sleeping varied considerably from those of the mainstream, which encourages protracted attention to one task. Rather, babies demanded food from their mothers or caretakers, who began by satifying their whims but then were easily distracted. As a result children demanded food and were fed more often than in mainstream homes, just as they napped more often but for shorter periods of time.

From this crowded and active world little Leroy goes to school. More than anything else school represents to him a marvelous place to socialize, a place where there are even more children with whom he can interact. In interviews with over 30 children attending elementary schools in Washington, D. C., almost all descriptions of school were couched in terms of social roles or interaction among people:

> "Carol do keep us....We need somebody to keep us.... We act up."
>
> "Everybody was talking to each other and our teacher had to hit them; they was running through the room."
>
> "Teacher put him out in the hallway 'cause he hit my friend James. He had to move his chair and sit down in the hall. And he went downstairs in somebody room."

Isolation may indeed be the severest form of punishment for these children, who generally prefer noise and knowing that other people are about to quiet and serenity. To many quiet is a frightening vacuum, devoid of social contacts.

Most of the children interviewed said they liked to go to school. When asked what went on in school they spoke almost unanimously of children hitting one another and of teachers or other school personnel hitting children. Yet only four children said they did not like to go to school, and only two complained about the hitting. Academic work was rarely mentioned, and then in terms of process, of doing arithmetic, of going to reading group, of coloring, rather than in terms of academic content. For example,

"In school I do some math, some English, some reading, and a whole bunch of other stuff."

Never were teachers described as teaching, nor children as learning. Neither did the children ever complain of boredom. But some did complain that the work was too hard; they wanted to do work that would come out right and be pleasant looking without too much effort of their part, work such as short handwriting exercises.

This is in sharp contrast to a group of middle class white children, the types of children with whom these inner-city blacks are most often compared. When the middle class white children were asked the same questions discussion of academic matters predominated. The teacher was described primarily in her role as instructor; they talked of the teacher teaching and of the children learning. They also complained of boredom, something never mentioned by the blacks, who sought amusement with one another rather than with academic content; they also complained of the lack of sufficient intellectual challenge in their schoolwork. Some classes were described as too easy; none were described as too hard. Socializing was also mentioned by the middle class whites, but it did not occupy the same dominant position as among the lower class blacks.

The black children saw their teachers as authority figures who were there to give them things and make them behave, often against their will. Teachers were usually seen as mean and punishing, and some children devoted considerable attention to figuring out what their teachers would do next. They were much concerned with what people did and were likely to do, teachers and children alike, but not with why they behaved as they did. In contrast, the white children saw their teachers as responsible for their learning and for keeping them amused. While some teachers were described as mean or unpleasant, relatively little attention was paid to their personalities or to the tenor of their relations with the children. This view is far more in keeping with teachers' desire to see themselves as pleasant and rational beings (see, for example, Eddy 1969, Fuchs 1969) than is the domineering and negative role painted by the lower class blacks. The white children's view of school as a place to be taught and to learn was for more congruent with their teachers' than was the black children's view of school as essentially a place in which to socialize with many, many children despite the mean adults who tried to stop them.

What lies behind these differences in viewpoints? Much attention has been paid in the literature to the effect of economic poverty on learning and on attitudes toward school. Among these economic factors crowding in the home, early sexual initiation, lack of privacy, early assumption for household responsibilities and the care of younger children; feelings of fatalism, dependency and inferiority; a higher tolerance for psycho-pathology; and a cult of masculinity (Lewis 1966) have all been listed as affecting children's learning (Deutsch 1967), and all occur to a greater or lesser degree in the inner city of Washington, D. C.

Racism and the lower caste status of Negroes is also sometimes called upon to explain the differences in perceptions of the school between teachers and inner-city black children.[1] One of the effects of racism, according to the literature, has been poor self-images or lowered self-esteem on the part of ghetto children (for example, see Deutsch 1967)[2]; it is said to affect both attitudes toward school and academic performance.

There is considerable evidence, however, that the children's feelings about themselves are far more ambivalent than merely positive or negative. Let us consider the business of fighting, which figured so prominently in the children's interviews. The children talked continually about fighting among themselves and about being hit by their teachers.

> "Teacher put him out in the hallway 'cause he hit my friend Darryl."

> "I had to stay in the office for hitting a girl in the face."

> "This girl name Mary and a girl name LaVerne they got into a fight and the girl name LaVerne thought she had this girl name Mary. And at three o'clock when it was time to go home, Mary grab her and drag her outside and beat her up."

> "I be getting all of them whipping and stuff. I beat up Leroy, Walter and Dennis. He tell the teacher and I got a whipping."

> "My teacher tore me up with a paddle. I said, 'Teacher.' I said, 'Teacher, he beat me a whop, a whop. He throwed me down the steps.' Teacher say, 'Oh, shut up.'"

> "They take you to this man name Mr. Jones. They make him beat you. Then he beat you real hard and you start crying."

> "You get beat 'cause you been something bad, like fighting, 'cause the boys be picking on you."

Fighting is bad. But is it? Young (1970) found that aggression was encouraged, even in infants.

Abrahams (1970) states, "... Most American Negroes commonly conceive of life...in terms of a conflict model.

...

Furthermore, this emphasis on a conflict style of action is not solely focused on the coercion imposed by the white man; it may be observed operating within the Negro community as well..." (pp 30-31). Indeed, all that which is "nigger" is bad in the eyes of almost all Negroes. But it is good to be bad!

Can the differences between the black and white children's perceptions of school be laid solely to differences in economic class and social caste? I suggest that other cultural factors also come into play. These factors may be considered historical and ethnic more than adaptations to existing conditions.

One of these factors, often observed, is a harking back to a mentality which allowed for survival under slave conditions. Passive resistance and playing the stupid fool were about the only tactics the slave had for maintaining his integrity. A response of some kind to every order or question also had its survival value, although the content of a verbal response was of relatively little importance.

Today teachers often complain that their children guess wildly when asked simple questions. For instance, at the beginning of an arithmetic period 11 year old Calvin was observed to tell his teacher that six times six was 36. A little later in the period she repeated the question:

"Calvin, what's six times six?"

"Twelve."

"Wrong. Six <u>times</u> six, not six plus six. Now what's six <u>times</u> six?"

"Twelve."

"No, Calvin. Six <u>times</u> six. What's six <u>times</u> six?"

"Twelve."

Calvin and his teacher were obviously not operating on the same wave lengths, and she was becoming more and more annoyed. Calvin was responding to her questions, which is what appeared to matter to him; apparently he was less concerned with the correctness of his responses.

Beyond those aspects of Negro folk culture determined primarily by economic pressures and the legacy of slavery, are others, ethnic in origin, many dating back, at least indirectly, to pre-slavery Africa. One such aspect is language. By now it has been amply demonstrated that Black English is an Afro-American Creole derived originally from the <u>lingua franca</u> developed along the west coast of Africa (Stewart 1969). The first slaves brought the language with them; they did not develop it here. The language is pervasive and is spoken with relatively little variation (except for Gullah) throughout the United States.

Speech style is another important aspect of the culture. As in so many cultures which stress interactions among people, rhetoric, the ability to impress with words and delivery, is far more important than the mere accuracy of one's statements. "For example, '500' may mean a given mathematical quantity, but it is far more likely to mean 'a lot'."

Responses to the rhetoric and other means of presenting one's self and defending one's self against others also vary from mainstream patterns. Posture and gestures, seldom given much attention by whites, are remarkably similar to those found along west coast Africa. The use of a shuffling step or little jig as a momentary time killer while one develops a proper response to a verbal challenge, is also apparently centuries old (Stewart, personal communication). So, too, the response that children often make to scoldings, pursing their lips and looking up to one corner.[3]

Beside these physical responses are certain intellectual ones. Life is generally seen as a contest, a contest which is best won through trickery(Abrahams 1970). The trickster, by no means unique to the African cultures, serves subservient people particularly well in their efforts to hold their own and even gain something from those who control them. The trickster tradition was especially helpful in the period of slavery; it continues to be ever present in the lore and thinking of the folk culture.

Dress styles also differ significantly from those of middle class whites, especially among males. Colors tend to be brighter and men sport outfits which stress colors which whites tend to reserve for women. For example, the following outfits were observed being worn by young men swinging along the streets of downtown Washington during one week last spring:

1. pink trousers, a dark purple sweater, and a kelly green crocheted beret

2. flame knit trousers and a red "wet look" leather jacket

3. kelly green trousers (seen on five men)

Women tend to follow mainstream styles and colors more closely, although they are more likely to strive for the latest styles and to use sequins more freely.

Folk arts also continue to flower, not only the music and dance which are so widely recognized and adopted by the mainstream, but also folk poetry with short rhyming lines such as that spoken by Mohammed Ali on numerous public occasions. From my own childhood, I remember other rhymes that were adopted by the mainstream.

"See you later, Alligator.
On the moon, baboon."

The work of Abrahams(1970) attests to the continued vitality of an extensive body of folk tales and jokes. Within the past ten years or so several black comedians have begun to share this culture with the mainstream.

Some of the above, such as the trickster mentality and the attitude of contest, are highly functional cultural trains given the circumstances under which most blacks now live. Others appear to have little intrinsic value or to be downright dysfunctional in adjusting to the mainstream traits such as children's relatively short attention spans and their tendency to sometimes ignore the content of their responses to teachers' questions.

But are they dysfunctional? If nothing else, these traits serve as cultural markers, points of identification by which one can know himself to be a member of his own group. They may not be functional in the mainstream, they may interfere with the attainment of well-salaried steady employment, but they do provide one with a feeling of identification and a group of peers.

Conclusions

The preceeding has been a description of the verbalized perceptions of school of a group of Washington, D. C.'s ghetto children and a discussion of some of the factors leading to those perceptions. It has been an attempt to identify those aspects of Afro-American folk culture which may enter into the classroom and help create the incongruities between teachers' and inner-city black children's views of school. Attention has been paid to the folk culture rather than to the broad range of behaviors of lower-class blacks because it is the folk culture which differs most strongly from that of the mainstream and for many blacks it serves as a point of departure for acculturation to the mainstream.

Once some of the points of conflict or of lack of communication, such as language or the love of conflict, are recognized, educators may well consider it desirable to systematically teach the mainstream patterns in an effort to aid acculturation. Just as mainstream English is learned more effectively through systematic instruction than through happenstance, so it may be that other cultural traits, especially those which interfere with acculturation, may also be learned best through systematic instruction. At the least, with a knowledge of the folk culture, teachers would be better able to understand the behavior of their students.

FOOTNOTES

[1] In Washington, however, at least 80 percent of the teachers (as well as 95 percent of the children) are black; in effect, it is an almost entirely black school system. Moreover, almost all the parents of the children interviewed attended segregated elementary schools. This might seem to weaken some of the effects of caste. The frequency of overt prejudice of some white teachers against their pupils.

[2] Lewis (1966), however, attributes these traits to the culture of poverty and to all impoverished groups, rather than to racism, or caste prejudice, as such.

[3] Young (1970) states that penetrating stares are used by parents and children often in the place of verbal interaction, especially the emphasizing of commands. Ghetto youngsters often talk of enemies exchanging looks in the place of verbal affronts. Young attributes the tendency of school children to stare up and off to one corner while being scolded as a means of cutting off communication, not mere politeness. Stewart (personal communication), however, classifies Negro folk culture as an eye-avoidance culture in which looking directly at a scolder is quite rude. It may well be that the authority figure should stare and the subservient one look away, so that when stares are exchanged a challenge is exchanged.

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